An American Spy Sto

THE MAN WHO KEPT THE SECRETS

Richard Helms and the CIA.
By Thomas Powers.
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By JOHN le CARRE

RICHARD HELMS gave the best 30 years of his life to the spy business. He joined the Central Intelligence Agency's precursor, the Office of Strategic Services, in 1943 during World War II. He attended the C.I.A.'s birth in 1947, became chief of operations of its clandestine arm in 1952, and finally head boy in 1968, at the age of 53 its first in-house director. As Thomas Powers rightly says, nobody else's career, not even that of Allen Dulles or William Colby, offers us quite such "an ideal pathway through the secret history of the last 30 years."

As chief of operations in the mid-1950's Helms oversaw the running of spies out of Berlin at the height of the cold war, controlled "networks" in the Soviet Union (such as they were, and they were very, very few). He ran the agency's spies in the Congo, he survived the shooting-down of the U-2 spy plane over Russia in 1960 and the Bay of Pigs fiasco in 1961. He presided over the C.I.A.'s massive involvement in Vietnam, the secret war in Laos and the notorious Phoenix pacification program. When the agency came under attack for its activities in Southeast Asia, Chile and the United States, Helms answered for it before Congressional committees. He weathered revelations of the agency's covert financing of the National Student Association, cultural magazines, labor unions and church groups.

His very durability, if nothing else, is impressive. Lyndon Johnson appointed him, Richard Nixon dismissed him in 1973 but gave him the United States ambassadorship to Iran. In the four years he held it, he made 16 trips to Washington, on 13 of them testifying before official bodies of investigation. In all, he testified on more than 30 occasions, for a total of more than a hundred hours. The Senate Select Committee on Intelligence found Helms's name on papers covering just about every project in which it took an interest. When a human guinea pig in the C.I.A. drug-testing program killed himself, Helms was at the heart of the cover-up. He knew about the plot to kill Patrice Lumumba, he was officially responsible for at least one aspect of the attempt to get the Mafia to kill Fidel Castro. He accommodated the White House plumbers when they needed spook equipment for E. Howard Hunt. It took the last snares of Watergate to bring him down. In December 1977 he pleaded no contest to a charge of lying to the Senate about the C.I.A.'s operations against Chile's Salvador Allende in 1970. He got a two-year jail sentence (suspended) and a $2,000 fine, which his former associates paid for him.

According to where you stand, Helms is a hero, a victim, a monster of the secret state, or a nice American guy doing a decent job for his country and getting kicked in the pants for it. Mr. Powers has the wit to stand nowhere, and in consequence has given us a splendid spy story, the best I have read for a long time, and all the better for being nonfiction. He tells us as much about the Presidency as he does about the C.I.A., and he leaves me scared stiff of both. An English novelist is not at first glance the natural animal to appraise his work, but on the other hand what Mr. Powers offers us is so admirably restrained that it positively cries out for the wayward attentions of the fiction writer.

We British stand in awe before such American acts of self-exposure. If Mr. Powers and his subject had been English, and he had written with the same frankness about *our* secret service, naming names and operations and even foreign agents, neither he nor his book would have seen the light of day for a very long time indeed. His trial would have been held largely *in camera*, he need not even have been fully advised of the grounds for the charges against him, and God help the press if they tried to beat the court's restrictions on reporting. For company, in the long years to follow, Mr. Powers would have had the English equivalents of Messrs. David Wise and Thomas B. Ross, Victor Marchetti and John D. Marks, Philip Agee, Frank Snepp, *et al.*, and almost anyone else who had dared to blow the whistle on Whitehall's very large intelligence machine. Within the United States intelligence community, this British state of affairs is regarded with naked envy. Only Britain's most radical journals call seriously for public accountability of our intelligence agencies, and not even they would suggest that our secret servants should be hauled bound and shorn before some hastily assembled Parliamentary kangaroo court in order to receive the flail of an uneasy public conscience. Our only nonfiction spy literature of any note is a grudging trickle of revelations from the 1939-45 war, much of it the "Man Called Intrepid" sort, laughed out of court by serious historians. So it's not surprising if we British should contemplate your political revelations as if they were our own. "If this is you without *your* make-up," we ask ourselves, dry-mouthed, "what on earth do we look like without ours?"

Richard Helms had very little experience of the world before he set out to put it right, but what he had was in retrospect spectacular. Unlike most C.I.A. men of the early days, who smelled quite as richly of class privilege as their British counterparts, he was neither moneyed nor high-born. He graduated not from Harvard, Princeton or Yale, but from Williams College and was voted the man in his class most likely to succeed. The year was 1935. His ambitions were journalistic and he became a wireman with United Press in Berlin. We may say, then, that he was ferreting out information from the start. With a bunch of other journalists, he interviewed Hitler and underestimated him as a menace, which hardly distinguishes him from older and wiser colleagues. Ambition counseled him to give up U.P. for a desk job with The Indianapolis Times, but in December 1941, when the United States entered the war, he joined the Navy, was commissioned and, after a spell in the Operations Department in New York plotting Ger-

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man submarine activity, he was recruited by his old Berlin bureau chief to the newly formed O.S.S. He hesitated, not sure whether the horse was strong enough to carry him to the top, which is where he wanted to be. When he accepted, Richard Helms effectively said goodbye to the overt world for the rest of his active life.

Mr. Powers makes much of Helms's early commitment to secrecy. Helms, whatever he became later, was an intelligence man pure and simple, committed to the need not to declare, to the need to put things back in their right place when you've read them. For Helms, says Mr. Powers, secrecy was not just second nature, it was his element, the very basis of his personality. Yet secrecy is not a constant. It has many forms, many reasons, and many effects upon the practitioner. What did it mean to Helms? Secrecy can isolate, it can unite. It can unite particularly those who despise the charade and puff of politics, which secret servants almost invariably do. For the inadequate it is a source of superiority; for the lonely, of kinship with a magic circle of fellow insiders; for the vain it is a means of impressing; and for the voluptuaries, a thing to be shared, no fun without a partner, and the agency, as Mr. Powers describes it, had its share of *them*. Within a secret department, secrecy is also money; Helms never strayed too far from advancement's path.

The young Helms seems to have entered the state of secrecy like a novice taking vows of chastity. He embraced it as a noble vocation that suited both the mood of the times and his own; it was renunciation and acceptance b[illegible] at once. We should try to understand this when such timid night-animals of espionage are dragged from their chosen obscurity and made to stand up and account for themselves under the glare of television lights, almost for the public sport. Exposure violates them exceptionally, it is a breach of the contract they have made with themselves and with society. An outsider can hardly appreciate their private rage. One who can, however, is Daniel Schorr, the television reporter who on April 28, 1975 received the full blast of Helms's pent-up spleen in a stream of obscenities delivered into his face while they stood directly outside the Vice President's office. Helms, "suffused with livid anger," held Schorr a killer for his part in publicizing the C.I.A.'s efforts to assassinate foreign leaders. To this day, Helms apparently remains unrepentant, and quite unconscious of the irony.

Helms's first experience of intelligence work, therefore, was acquired in the war against Hitler, where the enemy was clear and terrible, the aim his unconditional surrender, and where any method, however lawless and extreme, was justified by its results. Not necessarily, then, the ideal education for a "peacetime" intelligence officer. It was a time also when the occupied countries of Europe had to be shored up by the American liberator, when intervention was greeted with open arms by the oppressed. Later in his life, Helms would look in vain for such enthusiasm on the part of "liberated" countries. Helms was also a natural part of that seamless transition from the war against Hitler to the war against Stalin. Indeed, in Mr. Powers's account, there seemed scarcely to be a change at all, since the O.S.S. (those of it who were not left-wing sympathizers) was often as busy outflanking the Communists as rallying resistance against the Germans.

With the postwar expansion of the C.I.A. (bitterly opposed by J. Edgar Hoover) Helms was in on the ground floor of one of those companies-with-a-future he had always been looking for. Anti-Communism was Washington's boom industry; it could only grow. History did the rest. We see Helms at this stage nurturing his reputation quietly — central to everything but seldom leading, unspectacular but sound, intent upon his own career, yet suffering his setbacks with apparent fortitude. His enemies — though the "good soldier" would surely deny he had them — were fittingly characterized by the qualities he lacked. One of these was the dashing Richard Bissell, whom Helms called "wonder boy." An anarchic administrator with no use for Helms's abilities as a staff officer, Bissell masterminded the U-2 program and — with the Bay of Pigs invasion — his own professional destruction. Helms, the intelligence man, skeptical of covert action, calmly watched Bissell's rocket as it rose, wavered and plum[illegible] [illegible]t. He disapproved of the whole messy operation, but as a loyal officer he gave it his support. When it aborted, he got Bissell's job, managing exactly those covert operations which he by temperament so disliked. In the chagrined atmosphere of the Bay of Pigs post-mortem, everybody seems to have told John McCone, the new director, that Richard Helms, the high priest of the quieter way, was the man most likely to succeed.

Yet as Helms himself drew nearer and nearer to the Presidential sun, the wax on his own wings began to get distinctly tacky. What the Kennedys had wanted from the Bay of Pigs they wanted even more after it had failed: "Get rid of Castro." What was Camelot if it couldn't swat a few Hispanic flies in its own backyard? Of all forms of covert action, assassination is the most extreme, and as such Helms claims to have distrusted it the most. Not on moral grounds, of course — he speaks with contempt of avoiding "the soggy mass of morality" — but on the plain professional grounds that it doesn't work, it's insecure, it's a blind date with the future. I confess there are two intelligence jobs I definitely would not wish to take on. The first is calculating the political consequences of assassination; the second is looking after a successful assassin once he's done his job. Will guilt set in? Will he be assailed with an overwhelming desire to confess? Or will he simply content himself with blackmailing his masters? Assassinating the assassin gets you nowhere. You just start all over again.

Helms might see this clearly, believe it passionately, persuade others. He might even know, deep down, that covert action was all too often a brute substitute for intelligence failure. But as his time of power approached, he learned to recognize that he must cut the agency's cloth according to the idiosyncrasies, impatience and egregious self-interest of every President he served. If that meant riding roughshod over his own purist professional instincts, he would do it. How he did it, why, and the price he paid, are the subject of this book.

Helms was a loyal servant, better than many in that trade, I suspect, with loyalty galore to invest if only he could earn it back with interest. He could probably have run a legitimate intelligence service as well as anyone, but the service he took over had for too long embraced a whole bunch of activities that had nothing to do with the intricate business of collecting and distributing accurate secret intelligence, and frequently ran counter to it. Under the chaotic pressures of political Washington, Helms had to run wars, hunt out domestic "Communists" and play court procurer for Presidential dirty tricks. It is no coincidence that several of the C.I.A.'s crudest "covert" operations occurred in areas where it was bereft of good intelligence sources, for instance Cuba and Vietnam. In the Washington of Mr. Powers's book, if you can't deliver the intelligence, then you'd better deliver the action, because the barons are not going to stand around. It is not Helms's fault that he had to write his own charter or, in effect, determine what controls and what pecking order he would accept. He was too keen to survive, too impressed by power, too willing to abandon the professionalism that had won him his job. Yet any man so determined upon serving, as Helms was, will be prey to cruel human limitations. It would have taken a different and probably a worse director than he to survive the outrageous pressures of living in a state of day-to-day hysteria with the Presidential circle, and the only decent interpretation of William Colby's indecent rush to Tell All is that he was trying to say just this to Washington and the world at large.

The kiss-off, as they say on Madison Avenue, is at least funny. After his four years in Iran, Helms returned to Washington to set up a one-man consulting firm for Iranians wishing to trade in the United States. It did not flourish. The Iranian revolution took him completely by surprise.

Thomas Powers is a former Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter for United Press International and the author of "Diana: The Making of a Terrorist" and "The War at Home." He is not in the wrecking business. He tells us much of what Helms did. He tells us almost nothing of his affections, beyond his keen sense of loyalty to the agency. He gives us a patriotic bureaucrat, and a man of determined plainness, who loved his service and his country and preferred to obey "one President at a time" rather than puzzle over the fine

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print of the Constitution. Helms's virtues — their willed simplicity — he suggests were the cause of his downfall.

Yet the author's loyalty to Helms also disturbs him: there are nagging "buts" and "I wonder's." I mean no disrespect to Mr. Powers's achievement when I say that his quarry eludes his ultimate definition. Indeed this is half the fascination of the book, as Mr. Powers probably knows. His Helms remains to the last page a blank face moving through a crowded room. It is left to each reader to chalk in the features.

Do we like Helms? Well, almost. Does Mr. Powers? Yes, but. Would Helms care whether we liked him or not? Funnily enough, yes, I think he would, for there is a touching inadequacy about him that Mr. Powers documents almost incidentally: such as a mysterious servility, which Nixon cruelly played on, and which amounts at times to a deliberate self-effacement unbecoming in the head of a vast service, a ducking of personal responsibility. ("We are the executive not the legislative," Helms liked to plead. Alas, too often the agency was both.) Such as a fatal habit of "letting things ride" against his own better judgment. Such as a prickly incapacity to handle men of colorful persuasiveness, like Bissell. Such as a strain of self-pity, most in evidence when he appeared before his inquisitors in the investigative committees.

For here is yet another level in this many-layered book: as Mr. Powers tugs gently at the mask, he reveals not so much mystery as banality in depth, and the familiar expression of an injured subordinate who insists that he was only doing his duty: "If you wanted to survive, you learned to understand that you did what you were told when you didn't understand." That argument got nobody anywhere at Nuremberg, except to the gallows, and Richard Helms should have known better than to use it in the most democratic nation on earth. Nor, however much he may like to believe it — however much he acted it — was Helms a subordinate. He was Field Marshal of the whole huge secret army, and if he didn't understand his orders, who could? Run the C.I.A. for Richard Nixon and still insist you're Everyman, and you are definitely riding for a fall.

At which point I feel obliged to state my own interests, or lack of them. The question of the C.I.A.'s present dismal plight — highlighted, even as I write, by its apparent failure to identify a unit of Soviet troops who have been living unnoticed for several years 90 miles from the American mainland. There is a plethora of books around just now that either knock the agency or defend it, and like Mr. Powers I am repeatedly asked which side I am on. Curiously enough, I find myself closest to the view that Helms in his younger days represented within his own house, if to precious little effect. Namely, that sound and accurate intelligence-gathering is a crucial activity of any modern government, and that this is what the C.I.A. should be getting on with.

Three fatal ills have brought the C.I.A. to its knees; four, if you take gross overmanning as a malady in itself. Any one of them would have been enough to do the trick. The first is its disgraceful history of ill-considered, mismanaged "covert" intervention, often in areas where American interests were scarcely involved, where there was no independent information available to the Administration, and always on a scale so unsubtle that it could not be hidden even if it was denied: Tibet, Angola, the Congo, Indonesia, Guatemala, Chile, Laos, Vietnam, to name a few. Quite apart from the agency's reputation, such adventures have done more to discredit the Western cause than they have ever done to advance it. Lord knows what riches the United States might now be harvesting if the C.I.A. had put the same effort into supporting third-world economies that it put into destabilizing them.

The second fatal ill is the agency's preposterous position in the Washington hierarchy, which makes sane control of its operations impossible so long as it remains within the private duchy of the President and at the mercy of every fashionable wind that blows through town. But let me once more put on my British hat. The British Secret Service is at least a service. Its customers are the Crown's Ministries, who say what intelligence they need; the Secret Service then does its best to bring it in for them. It is accountable to ministers, who are therefore in equal measure themselves accountable for its good behavior and for the sensible use of its facilities. Constitutionally, it doesn't exist; practically, it is incorporated as an [illegible] available in the last resort for the unofficial pursuit of government policy, but principally for collecting secret intelligence. In practice, therefore, its targets are determined for it by mixed committees of the armed forces, the civil service and selected Parliamentary representatives, and any private adventuring would incur the righteous wrath of its masters, whose striped posteriors are held firmly to the line by cabinet.

Yet the C.I.A. to this day reposes like a drawerful of unaccountable money in the Presidental desk, a constant temptation and, by its very scale and secret lure, crying out to be deployed. It can undertake operations in defiance of the State Department and the military, even in competition with them; it functions in an atmosphere as capricious and fast-changing as Madison Avenue; at its worst, it has written its own briefs, rubber-stamped them with tame committees put there to control it, and gone out on the rampage with disastrous results — not least to its own legitimate intelligence-gathering activities, which often require far more time, patience and discretion than "covert action" will allow for.

Its third fatal ill, which is thrust upon it, is the American political romanticism that one moment espouses openness at any price, and the next revels in the high alchemy of secret panaceas and swift, unconventional, totally illegal solutions. Helms was a victim of both these moods; his distrust of them did nothing to protect him.

As a postscript, let me add that Mr. Powers quotes Helms as not just disliking "The Spy Who Came in From the Cold" but detesting it. I can forgive him this rather more easily than I can his admiration for the works of Howard Hunt. His reasons, apparently, are that I had "undermined the very bedrock of intelligence," by which he means trust, and the faith of men in the meaning of their work. Well, well, maybe he's right. It's just that, remembering whole secret armies left on the Laotian hillside to rot, and reading Mr. Powers's portrait of agency rivalries, I find myself sighing for the homely simplicity of my fictional betrayals. ■